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PROGRAM NBC Nightly News

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SUBJECT "Panama Drug Connection"

TOM BROKAW: There are two strong, new links tonight in the Panama drug connection. Three American soldiers and a Panamanian have been arrested in Puerto Rico after 77 pounds of cocaine was found in a U. S. military plane that they flew there from Panama. And Customs officials in Houston have seized 160 pounds of cocaine, worth about \$5 1/2 million, from a Panamanian grain shipment.

All of this comes as federal prosecutors in Miami and Tampa prepare to seek a drug smuggling indictment against General Manuel Noriega, who is Panama's military leader. And now, as NBC's Brian Ross reports tonight, there are new questions about Noriega's drug connections and his relationship with the CIA.

BRIAN ROSS: The drug smuggling indictment of General Noriega is expected to be a great embarrassment to the American CIA, which congressional sources say has had Noriega on its payroll for \$200,000 a year for at least ten years. The CIA said it would not confirm nor deny the payments.

But on Capitol Hill, congressional investigators say there is evidence the CIA continued its payments to Noriega even though it was known he was a major cocaine smuggler. Senator John Kerry will chair hearings next week on Noriega, the cocaine cartel and the CIA.

SENATOR JOHN KERRY [D-Mass.]: I'm satisfied that our relationship with General Noriega continued during the period of time that General Noriega was known by people within our government to be involved in a number of illegal or illicit activities.

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ROSS: An important witness against General Noriega is Jose Bandon, a former political adviser to Noriega who broke with him late last year and is now under federal protection in this country.

In testimony before the Miami grand jury, Bandon said this Panamanian air strip was provided by Noriega in 1984 as part of an escape route for Colombian drug bosses wanted for the murder of the Colombian Attorney General. Bandon says Noriega was paid a million dollars a month to hide the Colombians in Panama.

How many months were they in Panama?

JOSE BLANDON: Seven months.

ROSS: Seven months?

BLANDON: Yes. And they paid for that.

ROSS: Under the protection of General Noriega.

BLANDON: Yes.

ROSS: And so they were wanted in Colombia and they hid in Panama....

BLANDON: Yes.

ROSS: ...after the assassination of the Attorney General?

BLANDON: Yes.

ROSS: And how much did they pay to General Noriega?

BLANDON: Well, almost seven million dollars. So Noriega in the last five years has converted the government of Panama in a criminal enterprise.

ROSS: The Justice Department has now given prosecutors in Miami and Tampa the approval to go before grand juries tomorrow to seek Noriega's indictment. The charges against Noriega are expected to be announced on Friday.

Brian Ross, NBC News, Washington.